
COPAN Analysis: An Innovative, Community-Determined Approach to Rural Development

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A COPAN analysis, a method for including collaborations, opportunities, priorities, assets, and needs, articulates and examines multiple perspectives for guiding rural development. This article outlines the authors' development and testing of their COPAN analysis for not-for-profit, non-governmental organizations (NGO) operating in Ghana to learn the development needs of rural populations. Since the Ghanaian government lacks a centralized approach to rural development, the Ghanaian people rely on NGOs, religious organizations, and traditional leaders to fill the void. The creation of this needs assessment derives from 20 years of sustained collaboration with women farmers in Ghana's Volta Region through which the authors have built relationships of trust as they addressed immediate humanitarian and social issues. Working through their NGO, the authors tested their COPAN analysis on the planning process for an agricultural maker space project that will benefit farmers and petty traders in four, neighboring small towns. Initiating numerous community conversations that culminated in a community listening session, the authors designed a flexible, adaptable approach to learning rural development needs and priorities that focuses attention on what is important to the local communities. Because of the success of this process, the authors are poised to design projects with greater impact when using the COPAN analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Subsistence farmers engaged in rain-fed agriculture in Ghana meet obstacles every day such as climate change, illness, currency devaluation, back-breaking labor due to lack of modern equipment, and the high cost of inputs. When conditions allow for a productive harvest, the farmers report their frustration. A woman farmer explains the gravity of the situation, "You

send foodstuffs to the market and bring it back because there is no money...You put too much in and get less profit.”

This article outlines the authors’ collaborations with farmers in Ghana’s Volta Region that led to the development and testing of their COPAN analysis for rural developers who want to hear from the people themselves what they identify as their development needs. The COPAN analysis is an adaptive approach requiring a long-term commitment to building relationships of trust, which encourages community willingness to be more open in sharing their successes, challenges, and needs.

The authors did not start their interactions in Ghana as rural developers. In fact, we started by leading a regional campus study abroad. For the first fifteen years, our work was all about relationship building with local farmers, community leaders, and cultural preservationists starting in Ho and expanding our reach to nearby small towns. Through the process of getting to know people in Ghana, we encouraged our student travelers to find and respond to the farmers’ expressed needs using their disciplinary skills and abilities as agricultural students at the university. For example, they provided animal health interventions and immunizations, planted orange groves for beekeepers, and taught enrichment courses in agriculture and animal husbandry to area farmers and high school agricultural students.

During the years of successful trips, we worked with a dedicated group of community developers and American and international scholars. We focused our rural development efforts in eleven towns in and around the Ho Municipality, Volta Region, Ghana. We recognized that women farmers are the backbone of subsistence agriculture but rarely have access to traditional loans to grow their businesses. Additionally, commercial banks in Ghana are reluctant to loan to any small-holder farmers because of the precarious nature of their rain-fed agricultural system. Because of this, women farmers are doubly denied, first as women, second as subsistence farmers (Oxfam, 2022). To ameliorate this situation, we implemented a dynamic, co-operative microloan and savings (MLS) program for women farmers. From 2011 to the present, we created the organizational process and eventually raised the funds to support 16 groups. These groups provide a community and financial support system for more than 160 farmers and small businesspeople, approximately 85% of whom are women. These efforts ripple out to their families and their communities.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2018, we reorganized from an education abroad to a not-for-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) Ghana Beyond Subsistence (GBS). With a commitment to economic justice, we focused our efforts in rural development. While we recognize that we can't bring all Ghanaians to a point "beyond subsistence," we have seen how we can impact the lives of the people with whom we work. In the past six years, we have expanded our work with Ghanaian farmers, petty traders, extension officers, traditional and municipal leaders, educators, and other cultural producers to assess and improve the efficacy of our international rural development efforts in the region.

In our years of working with farmers in Ghana, we have observed that many rural development efforts retain a colonial approach of top-down decision-making, which means that local communities have not been given much choice in directing their rural development. On the other hand, through listening, we have learned many of the indigenous cultural practices for organizing and managing communities, such as traditional community entry expectations, or group codes for interactions, like excusing themselves, "We will consult the old lady," meaning the farmers want to discuss an issue in private, then return with a common response. We have learned to value and trust local expertise and to champion their causes. We have learned that the best foreign investment in Ghana is supporting locally identified needs as opposed to imposing foreign structures. We have also observed that the authors' backgrounds and experiences afford us the opportunity to bring people together, to conduct productive discussions, and to discover the needs and priorities of rural people.

During regular sessions year after year, the farmers have offered their own ideas and requests about what they need to be more sustainable and to move beyond subsistence. Noting that these suggestions and requests cluster in common areas, we envisioned an accessible, common, multipurpose facility, in contemporary terms an Agricultural Maker Space, where farmers and traders can take their agricultural produce to add value through preparation and preservation prior to sending them to market.

PROBLEMS FACING RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA

Despite persistent national challenges, Ghana has been a stable democracy since 1992 and has made tremendous progress toward reducing poverty (USAID, 2023). When offshore oil was discovered in 2007, the

subsequent boost in GDP (Ghana Energy Database, 2024) put the Republic of Ghana on a fast track to being reclassified by the World Bank and the International Development Association (IDA) from a developing nation to a lower-middle income country. This reclassification meant that Ghana lost access to the highly concessional IDA loans with long grace periods and low interest rates, which led to unstable currency and rapid inflation, which hurt the poor the most (Bollyky, 2019). Still, as of 2018, Ghana was among the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world and the second-largest economy in Africa. Oxfam International reports that Ghana has succeeded in reducing poverty particularly in the southern part of the country that includes Accra, the capital city, and Tema, the industrial port city. Yet, much of the population in the northern half of the nation subsists on less than \$1 per day.

Additionally, Oxfam points out:

- Inequalities between women and men continue to be very high.
- Between 2006 and 2016 the country saw 1,000 new US dollar millionaires created, but only 60 of these were women.
- A girl from a poor family is 14 times more likely never to have been to school than one from a rich family (Oxfam, 2022).

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reports that 68% of Ghanaians reside in rural areas. More than 52% of the labor force engages in agriculture, and approximately 39% of the farm labor force is women. Even though agriculture contributes to 54% of Ghana's GDP, it accounts for over 40% of export earnings and provides over 90% of the food needs of the country, Ghana's agriculture remains predominantly smallholder, traditional rather than scientific, and rain-fed (FAO, 2023).

In 2012, Ghana agreed to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations into their own domestic development goals. Against UN recommendations, the national government decentralized the planning approach, limited its own development efforts to the construction of roads, ports, and other infrastructure, and invited other stakeholders such as NGOs, religious organizations, traditional leaders, and UN agencies to pick up the slack. In the absence of centralized guidance, government leaders left the nation without a coordinated, holistic approach, and development groups scrambled to pick up the pieces.

With so many diverse groups taking on the challenge, cooperative extension, state universities, and others produced manuals to give advice on how to prepare and plan development efforts. Each resource offers its own approach to best practices for learning rural development need and priorities, (XXXX, 2024). For example, *The Nuts & Bolts of Community Needs Assessment: Pros and Cons of Assessment Methods* outlines the needs, benefits, and approaches, such as Focus Group Interviews, Asset Mapping, and Community Survey Questionnaires, (University of New Hampshire, 2024). The Kellogg Foundation's *Building a Healthier Tomorrow: A Manual for Rural Coalition Building* offers tools for assessing community needs and evaluating program effectiveness through conducting surveys, interviews, and focus groups, (Landis, et. al., 1995). The Center for Community Health and Development at the University of Kansas, *The Community Toolbox* offers guidance in listening, information gathering, and analyzing problems. The Better Evaluation Global Evaluation Initiative, *Outcome Harvesting* looks at rural development reports and works backwards from an outcome to determine whether the intervention is the agent of change (Wilson-Grau et al, 2024).

INNOVATING AN APPROACH TO LEARNING RURAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Rural development needs can be learned through quantitative research and analytical methods such as the analysis of widely available census data and vital statistics records. Typically, the quantitative method of content analysis is limited to the data gathered by governmental and official community sources to identify patterns, trends, and relationships. However, if rural developers were only to focus on national statistics, they would find that the studies usually overlook rural communities.

A more nuanced method to learn about people, their successes, their challenges, and what they want in their personal, familial, and community lives is qualitative research. Qualitative research can provide deeper insights into real-world problems by gathering and studying participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviors. Employing qualitative research methods, researchers can see another way to identify community assets and resources, to assess specific community needs, and to express and set priorities. Qualitative research can help researchers understand how and why programs or interventions may work or fail to work as intended.

One of the most common approaches to qualitative research is participant observation. This approach places the researcher within the

cultural group to learn from group insiders. From participant observation with the informants, researchers can learn life histories, develop case studies, identify and analyze social networks, conduct surveys, and identify community gatekeepers and experts to serve in advisory groups, steering committees, and community forums. A significant advantage of participant observation derives from the potential of building relationships of trust and establishing long-term friendships.

Relying on their years of participation observation, the authors devised a plan, the COPAN analysis. In this analysis, researchers consider the Collaborations, Opportunities, Priorities, Assets, and Needs, or COPAN for guiding rural development as outlined in this article. This analysis builds upon sustained collaborations to explore community opportunities, to set priorities, to map out assets, and to articulate local needs. This approach is similar to a SWOT analysis that details the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing an organization (Puyt, 2024). While a SWOT analysis is appropriate for programs, we contend that the COPAN analysis more precisely targets issues and arrives at better solutions for rural development projects.

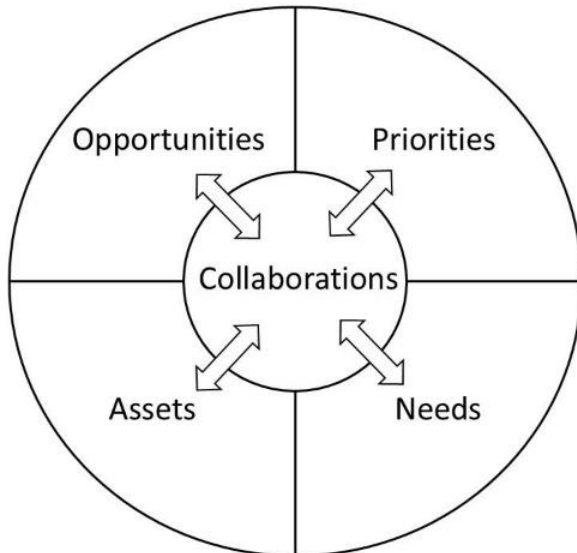


Figure 1. COPAN Analysis diagram of interactive process

The COPAN diagram provides a quick overview of the evaluative process (See Figure 1). Similar to a pie chart, this circular chart is divided into four equal quadrants with a central circular field overlaying the other four quadrants intending to illustrate that the collaborations field is in constant contact with the other categories. Where a Venn diagram uses overlapping and intersecting fields to demonstrate the common relationship between the fields, a COPAN analysis foregrounds collaborations as a constant component in determining the relationship between the other four fields of inquiry: opportunities, priorities, assets, and needs. Although the feedback identified within these categories will vary from project to project, a COPAN analysis requires consideration of each of the following categories:

- **Collaborations** is the starting point of a COPAN analysis. As outlined in Table 1, Collaborations is central to the analysis and is ongoing. Collaborations requires a developer and community commitment that evolves over time, recognizes shared humanity, makes common cause, and builds relationships to meet the shared interests of all parties.
- **Opportunities** refers to a set of favorable circumstances that make it possible to accomplish a goal, such as potential community improvement, social engagement, increased educational attainment, community pride, and access to funding or resources.
- **Priorities** places a ranked value on which potential project meets the most pressing needs, or offers the greatest benefit for the community.
- **Assets** describes useful or valuable tangible and intangible community resources, persons, or qualities. For example, community ethos, knowledge, experience, leadership, property, equipment, and materials that can be used to produce positive economic value.
- **Needs** observes deficiencies, something required for an individual or community to flourish. They include necessities of community life, sustenance, economic empowerment, and personal development.

An effective COPAN analysis elicits locally appropriate solutions based on thorough, deep, and sustained discussions with community

partners, such as farmers, extension officers, community leaders, experts in their fields, and other interested parties who have a stake in the outcome.

DESIGNING AN AGRICULTURAL MAKER SPACE PROJECT

Over 20 years of working with MLS groups, we have listened to their successes, challenges, needs, and aspirations. We have provided immediate remedies to problems facing farmers, including animal vaccines, fertilizers and pesticides, and technical support. As previously mentioned, our early collaborations led us to form micro-loan and savings groups. In 2018, we decided to pivot our focus from an education abroad toward rural development allowing us to expand our fundraising efforts.

As our relationship developed with the people of the Kpenoe Traditional Area, their leader, Togbe Kotoku XI, Paramount Chief, asked us to consider a large-scale project in their community. Using early versions of the COPAN analysis, we started to formulate an innovative approach toward rural development through the construction of an accessible, multipurpose facility that provides space and access to equipment to boost economic opportunity and agricultural innovation for the farmers and petty traders in nine of our MLS groups in four neighboring rural communities, specifically Kpenoe, Takla Gborgame, Hodzo Achianse, and Akoefe Gadza.

Our annual meetings with our MLS groups made it clear that if the farmers and traders wanted to add value to their produce prior to sending it to market, they needed access to the processing and preservation equipment to do so. Togbe Kotoku offered to secure land in his centrally located community where we could build a facility that would serve the needs of Kpenoe and three neighboring communities with established GBS MLS groups. During our annual residency in Ghana in 2022, we conducted multiple community forum meetings with all the farmers and traders in the MLS groups. The following year, we scheduled a committee meeting and listening session to discuss and prioritize specific community, farming, processing, preservation, and marketing needs that an agricultural maker space could support.

AGRICULTURAL MAKER SPACE COMMITTEE MEETING

At the July 2023 committee meeting and listening session, we brought together the MLS farmer group leaders representing each of the four MLS groups in Kpenoe, one group in Takla, two groups in Hodzo, and one group in Akoefe, alongside a local advisory team of professional

community developers, traditional leaders, religious leaders, representatives of the Kpenoe Governmental School Feeding Program, and representatives of the local mental health program that serves all four communities. An architectural design team attended and carefully observed the proceedings so that they could convert the conversation into the plan for the physical building. In this meeting, we reiterated the main purpose to build upon current farming activities through an appropriately-designed maker space to help the farmers improve their businesses. To achieve clarity, we developed the following series of six questions designed to explore and review key development themes that cluster into COPAN analysis categories:

Questions	Themes	COPAN
1. What type of surplus produce do you currently grow?	Marketing	Assets
2. What do other farmers grow and make to sell?	community awareness	Opportunities
3. What ideas do you have to grow -> make -> sell?	potential adaptation, innovation	Opportunities
4. What facilities and equipment will you need?	project planning	Needs
5. How frequently will you need/ use _____?	priority setting	Priorities
6. Where do you see potential partnerships?	community, interconnections, collaboration, cooperation, relationship building	Collaborations

For the listening session, the group divided into five groups, each led by a member of the advisory team, to answer and report on the questions. We supplied the groups with sticky notes and markers and asked them to record every response on a single sheet of paper.

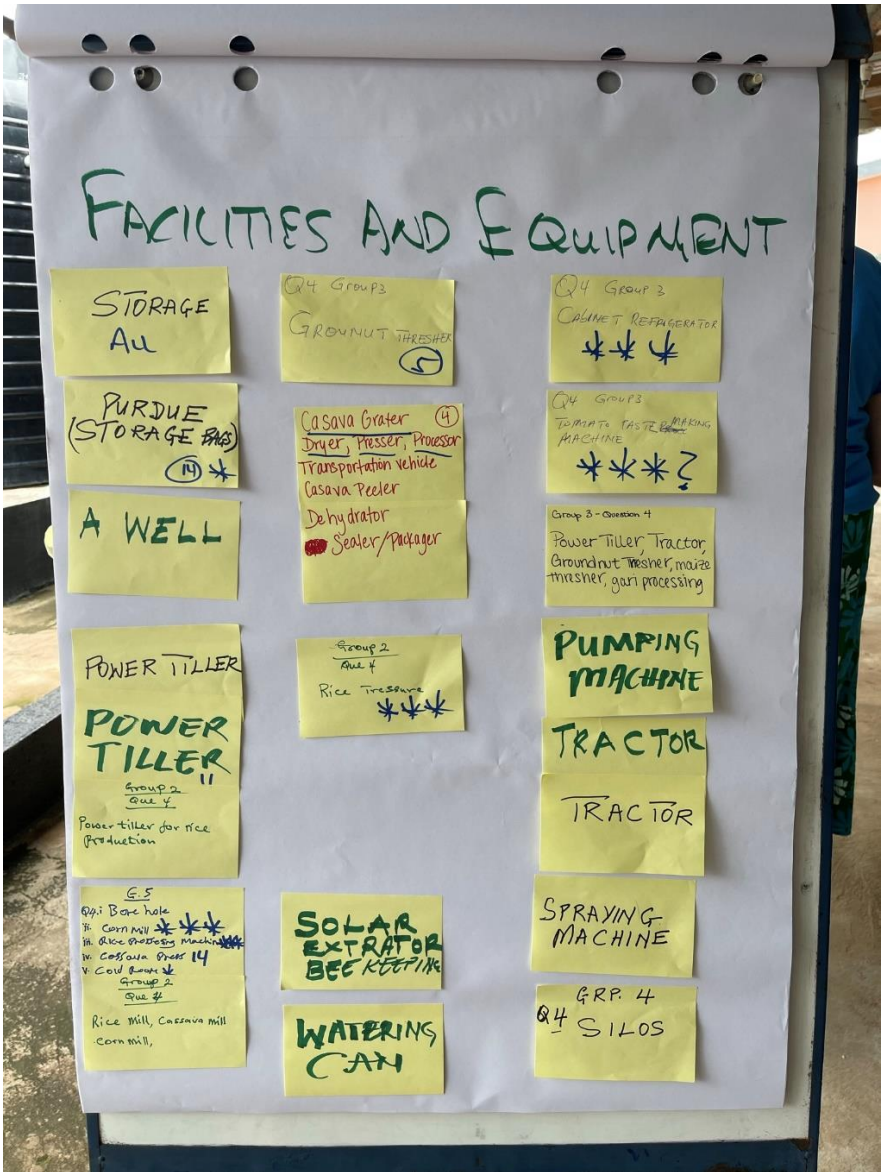


Figure 2. A visual aid from the committee and listening session documenting equipment needs and priorities (Courtesy of Nathan Crook, 28 June 2023).

We organized their responses on poster board so we could cluster similar responses. They offered their responses to the first four questions,

prioritized their facility and equipment needs, and identified potential partnerships:

1. What surplus produce do you currently grow?

Vegetables: Okro, tomatoes, green vegetables, garden egg, pepper (*kpakpo shitor*), cabbage
 Starches: Cassava, maize, rice, yam
 Animals: Poultry, goat

2. What do other farmers grow and make to sell?

Vegetables: Onions, peppers, garden egg (eggplant)
 Starches: Cassava, rice, yam, maize, sweet potato, plantain, cocoyam
 Other: Pineapple, groundnut (peanuts), beans (cow peas), cocoa, sugar cane
 Processed: Palm oil, palm wine, *akpeteshie* (palm gin), cassava dough, cassava *gari*

3. What ideas do you have to grow, make, sell?

Grow: Rice, maize, beans, groundnut, potato, cabbage, green pepper, sweet potatoes
 Make: Milled rice, processed cassava (*gari*), groundnut oil, palm oil, dried produce, honey

4. What Facilities and Equipment will you need?

Processing Equipment: Rice thresher, rice mill, corn mill, cassava processing peeler/ press/ grater/ dryer/ mill, groundnut thresher/ oil extractor, beans processor, palm oil press, produce drying and packaging, solar honey extractor, tomato paste processor
 Storage: Purdue Improved Crops Storage (PICS) bags, cabinet refrigeration, cold room, sealing packager, grain silo
 Farming Equipment: Power tiller, rice tiller, watering cans, pump sprayers for agrochemicals, transportation vehicle, tractor

Other: Well, cistern for collecting and mixing pumped and rainwater

5. How frequently will you need/ use these Facilities and Equipment?

Recorded using the following Likert scale: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Seasonally, Annually, Never.

High Priority:	Storage, PICS bags, sealing packager, refrigerator/ freezer/ cold room, water well/ cistern, power tiller, power rice tiller/ thresher/ mill, corn mill, cassava processing peeler/ press/ grater/ dryer/ mill, tomato paste processor, pump sprayers for agrochemicals
Medium Priority:	Tractor, groundnut thresher/ oil extractor, transportation vehicle
Low Priority:	Solar honey extractor, watering can, produce dehydrator, beans processor, palm oil press, grain silo

6. Where do you see potential partnerships?

Ghana Education Service School Feeding Program, National Health Service Mental Health Clinic Feeding Program, Farmer Field School, Market women, Veterinarian, Welder, Electrician

The meeting ended with a tour of the building site and a blessing of the project performed by Togbe Samuel Acquency, a youth development chief.



Figure 3. Togbe Samuel Aquency blessing the agricultural maker space project site (Courtesy of Nathan Crook, 28 June 2023).

RESULTS OF APPLYING THE COPAN ANALYSIS

Through the committee meeting and listening session process, we tested the COPAN analysis and formulated our Agricultural Maker Space plan.

First, COPAN is proving to be an effective approach to guiding our thinking. Leaning into our sustained collaborations to explore community opportunities, we have formulated a template to set priorities, to map out assets, and to articulate local needs. Setting these parameters ensures that we do not overlook any aspect of the analysis.

The process of conducting the COPAN analysis resulted in the following:

Collaborations We deepened our relationships with long-term friends with whom we enjoy relationships of trust, openness, and honesty. We also identified potential

	partnerships as detailed in the responses to question six.
Opportunities	We recognized the communities would support a local market, benefit from a Farmer Field School geared toward a niche, organic, and/or sustainable agriculture, patronize a veterinary clinic, and contribute to a local school feeding program as outlined in questions two and three.
Priorities	We observed the group as they ranked their needs and set their own priorities as outlined in question five.
Assets	We listed the types of surplus foodstuffs as outlined in question one. We categorized areas of committed community support by expertise, materials, labor, and land. We also identified specific human and institutional resource collaborators, such as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, traditional leaders, MLS group members, and extension services.
Needs	We learned the immediate, mid-, and long-term needs of the communities as outlined in the responses to question four.

Second, the committee agreed that the Togbe Kotoku XI Agricultural Maker Space will be a multipurpose facility that boosts opportunity and innovation for farmers and petty traders in the GBS network of co-operative MLS groups in the towns of Kpenoe, Takla, Hodzo, and Akoefe. We will design and build this maker space upon expressed farmer, trader, and community needs and priorities. It will be expandable by phases and will start with the ground floor of a multi-story design. The first phase will include a commercial kitchen where farmers and marketers can add value to their produce through processing and preservation, indoor and outdoor meeting and workspace, secure storage space for equipment, materials, goods, cold storage room or freezer, living space for a caretaker, retail, marketing space for vendors, secure work and storage space for welder,

electrician, seamstress, and tailor, and a block of restrooms that will be accessible to the community.

Knowing that the Agricultural Maker Space will require years to fundraise and build, in the short term, we have identified immediate needs in these communities. To fulfill these, GBS has already responded by providing Wellington boots, chicken hutches, bee hives and supplies (See Figure 4), as well as workshops in recordkeeping, beekeeping, and herd health. Funding for immediate needs will only improve the members' potential for success, their profitability, their education and skills. For the long term, we will continue to find ways to enhance market share for local farmers by way of improving communication and developing a wider, more reliable, commercial distribution network connecting the four towns.



Figure 4. Hodzo-Achianse bee house and scientific bee boxes constructed to consolidate hives in MLS group-owned orange groves, and to protect beehives from fires due to slash and burn agriculture (Courtesy of Dickson Asase, 14 October 2025).

CONCLUSION

In COPAN, we have designed a flexible, adaptable approach to rural development that focuses the developers' attention on what is important to the local communities. Collaboration is key. In this design, developers must always move through collaboration in order to identify the community's sense of available opportunities, priorities, and assets, along with perceived needs.

COPAN is as much a social analysis as it is a needs analysis. It identifies and articulates the people and relationships required to imagine, design, and complete a successful rural development project. This context-driven approach grounds rural development interactions in collaborations where the community is the driver and the individuals are valued assets. The presence and engagement of dynamic and trusted local leadership provides a critical asset. Local leaders often have a greater capacity for understanding local conditions, they tend to have systems of interaction and communication in place that engender cooperation, trust, and mutual respect.

By applying a COPAN analysis in the rural communities northeast of Ho, we have learned more about our community partners and their interests in expanding their farms and businesses. We have also learned to better focus our development agenda by applying the COPAN categories to our project discussions. While we recognize that as rural developers, we benefit from the fact that we are nimble and adaptable, this also means that we are disadvantaged by limited funds. By developing and employing the COPAN analysis, we have created a dynamic, cost-friendly process to identify and address the needs of the people within our MLS groups. It is our hope that other development groups will consider following the COPAN analysis and contribute to this developing discussion.

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The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript.

INFORMED CONSENT

The authors declare that we have sought and received informed consent.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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